

The Iberosfera as a post-colonial project

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The paper analyzes the attributes and chances of the Iberosfera concept created by the Spanish Vox party and its Latin American allies in today's post-colonial landscape in Latin America. The Iberosfera builds on previous projects of the Spanish Right to gain influence in Latin America, and likely on the idea of Anglosphere created by James C. Bennett. The idea can be understood as an anticolonial project, and arrives at a great time to capitalize on the sentiments of encroachment by Eurasian powers in Latin America. China, Russia, and to some extent Iran is on the march in Latin America, in alliance of certain left-wing governments. This potentially offers an anti-imperialist framework for the concept, although its members have to balance their relationship with the United States, in order not to be seen as malign tools of the 'Northern Giant'.

The Concept and its Antecedents

The *Iberosfera* concept of the radical conservative Spanish Vox party is in use since 2020 by the party. It presumes a geopolitical sphere encompassing all Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries in the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America – between the Rio Grande and Tierra del Fuego. It was further “officialized” by the 2021 Carta de Madrid, which codifies the core values of Iberosfera parties. The Vox’s own Fundación Disenso think tank plays an important role in promoting knowledge about the political and historical background of the project, along with the Gaceta of Iberosfera, acquired and renamed by the Vox to align with its aims in 2020. Since 2021, too, the “Jóvenes líderes the Iberosfera” (Young leaders of the Iberosfera) annual program brings together the network of the intended new generation of leaders adhering to this framework of thinking.

The point of the concept is the promotion of natural allyship between the old colonial centers of the Iberian Peninsula and its former overseas territories in the Western Hemisphere. It is a natural continuation of earlier Latin American approaches of the Spanish Right (understood in the modern ideological sense). There is no concrete proof that it references the Anglosphere of James C. Bennett, however, the relation is inescapable. As the Anglosphere, it looks to build post-colonial ties with former colonial possessions in the world-system of the 21st century, stressing the value and commonality of cultural heritage created in the colonial period. In its modern form, then, the Iberosfera can be understood as a clever adoption of a concept from another post-colonial systemic theory. However, the repeated attempts of the Spanish conservatism – and classical liberalism – to win back some goodwill on its former colonies go a long way back to the 19th century.

Spain long struggled with its relations with Latin America both before and after the loss of its overseas empire, and certain answers emphasized the common interest of the old colonial metropole and the American continent. Santiago Abascal himself referenced the Cadiz Constitution of 1812 as the core text of the Spanish-Latin American connection for the post-imperial age.¹ This text was supposed to provide equal rights to the overseas territories of Spain, with the originals on the Iberian Peninsula. This constitution was

discarded after the restoration of the Bourbons in 1814, and Spain went on to lose the war against its colonies by the mid-1820s.² Abascal, obviously, referenced not the concrete political concept of the Cadiz Constitution with an intercontinental empire but the more abstract notion of the intercontinental community that was conceptualized in it. This text of 1812 was referenced in the creation of the Hispanidad concept in the 1920s, coined by the Argentine-residing Spanish monk Zacarrías Vizcarra, and his Spanish friend, Ramiro de Maeztu.³ The Hispanidad concept, like the Iberosfera of today, called for the unity of the old colonial center of Spain and its former possessions, except that it did not include Portugal, given that the latter was still a colonial empire concentrated in Africa. The Franco regime (1939-1975) advocated this approach too, as its international reach was very limited in its first years, especially after the early period after the Second World War.⁴ After the successful democratic transition and European integration, the approach to Latin America became more tangential, more like a special partner outside of its core European context than an area of possible geopolitical influence and cultural integration. The PSOE-PP alternation meant mostly that the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) approached South America more like a "tercermundista" government that is, in solidarity with the Third World, while the PP (Partido Popular, Popular Party) followed a more USA-oriented, obviously conservative-friendly approach.⁵

As the offshoot of the Partido Popular, Vox's concept of Iberosfera in late 2020 was primarily received with contempt as a neo-colonialist venture with racist overtones. The party unequivocally praises the landing of Christopher Columbus, the Conquista, and the colonial period of the 16th-19th century as processes that bind Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula together through common languages and a shared „cosmovision" - as Fernando Abascal, founder and leader of the Vox, wrote of the common spiritual heritage of Iberian and Latin American peoples.⁶ One of its official founding documents, the 2021 Carta de Madrid calls for the defence of shared values - pluralism, private property, human rights - and freedom in the countries of the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America, thus evoking an alliance of equals on the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean. This is criticized as by the Left and centre-left as a neo-colonialist venture. For progressives and Marxists, it means the denial of a supposed Spanish and Portuguese genocide and the celebration

of Iberian cultural and physical colonialism.⁷ The Zeitgeist of contemporary Latin America – at least on the left – is that of the promoting and celebrating Indigenous identities and histories, and the Vox advocating the creation of an Iberosfera sounds like blasphemy. At first glance, the Iberosfera concept may sound outlandish and on the periphery of possible political futures of Latin America. In this paper, I will attempt to show how the project and its participants situate among the post-colonial projects of Latin America, and how this provides them with opportunities for political appeal.

The Vox approach to Latin America is not unprecedented. Obviously, there is some reason that the Spanish economic encroachment is seen by some South American commentators as an imperialist threat. While Spain is a small economy compared to the economy of Latin America, Spanish firms played an outsized role in the privatization process in Latin America in the 1990s. In this decade, many “statist” economies reformed themselves following the globalization Zeitgeist, and Spain was in a financial position to capitalize on it. According to a 2016 analysis, Spain dominated both the 1990s and the 2000s in direct FDI to Latin America, overtaking the United States and China.⁸ It was still the second-biggest investor in most South American countries by 2022, after the United States.⁹ Some dubbed Spain’s 1990s economic onslaught in Latin America the “New Conquista,” seeing Spain as a returning imperialist power in a neoliberal world where capital flows served geopolitical goals.¹⁰ Luis Herrán-Ávila (2023), considered the new network project of Vox as a Latin American version of the CIA-funded World Anticommunist League.¹¹

However, the Vox approach can be seen as a novel, comprehensive attempt to deal with the countries of Latin America that can counter the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist rhetoric of the continent’s past history. Of course, this is a project with a conservative bias. The signatories of the Carta de Madrid are all representatives of the Right in their respective countries. But this front of the conservatives, as many populist movements in the last decade, presents itself as a front of “rebels” resisting alter globalization encroachment. This approach could very well echo with a broader continental audience. The question here is which transnational forces are considered to be the more significant threat to the continent.

What then does Vox consider to be the forces threatening a revived Iberosfera and how do other, left and progressive actors view such a project?

The Reception of the *Carta de Madrid*

The Carta de Madrid, (date) the founding text of the Iberosfera concept, considers “communist totalitarianism” as the core threat to its development. The Carta considers “third countries” are supporting these totalitarian forces. Their concrete organizational structures are identified as the “Sao Paulo Forum” and the “Puebla Group.”¹² Both are groupings of left-wing parties notably from Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Bolivia. These four countries, in turn, are supported by – or at least have amicable relationships with – Russia, China, and Iran. In this sense, we can see that the Carta de Madrid, considers these forces the primary danger to its political evolution in Latin America. A recent publication in the journal of the Fundación Disenso, the *Gaceta de Iberosfera*, by Mexican political scientist and activist Raúl Tortolero, warns about the “imperialism of the Red Dragon”.¹³ Shiite Iran is also a “natural” antagonist to Vox, with its nostalgia toward the Reconquista and its emphasis on defending “European civilization.” Russia is understood as an enemy not because of its particular policies but mostly in the context of helping the Sao Paulo Forum regimes in their anti-Americanism, thus curbing the Right’s advance.

The question is, can a new project be built on the foundation of the opposition to these forces? First, we have to look at some global antecedents. This attempt to construct a “right-wing anti-imperialism” had some success in other global regions. A new synthesis by James Mark and his colleagues on the histories of Eastern Bloc internationalism in the Cold War notes that anti-colonial rhetoric was used effectively by Eastern European opposition movements to wage propaganda warfare against the Soviet dominance of the region. The authors note, too, that these conservative movements did not connect their projects with the broader anti-colonial struggles playing out in the Global South. However, they also quote a 1988 article from the Polish *Solidarność* movement, which points out that Soviet support for anti-colonial forces is just colonialism in a new guise.¹⁴ The new Spanish project can exploit this perspective with the Global South: framing the struggle against anti-West Eurasian forces as anti-colonialism instead of turning on the West. This is not just a theoretical parallel. At the 2022 CPAC meeting in Mexico, Lech Walesa, the

great elder statesman of the *Solidarność*, addressed the delegates. He compared the search and struggle for the correct answers to the challenges of globalization with the fight against Soviet Communism during the Cold War, thus connecting the old anti-colonial struggles of Eastern Europe with the proposed effort of his hosts against their left-wing counterparts. He also viewed Russian expansionism as a continuing challenge for the West, with the Soviets before 1990 and the contemporary Russo-Ukrainian war in the present, directly connecting today's anti-colonialism with a pro-Western stance.¹⁵

This strategy might be timely. Especially as the influence of China, and the anti-colonial sentiments towards the Western Hemisphere may be declining as the Eurasian powers exert themselves. A new book *Estallido Popular* (Popular Eruption) published in August 2023 by radical left-wing Peruvian thinkers on the causes, processes, and consequences of Peru's widespread unrest after the fall of left-wing President Castillo in December 2022.¹⁶ This book is uncritically left-wing ideologically, but two elements stand out regarding our topic. First, the disillusionment with traditional left-wing parties and movements is a core feature of all the essays. Second, the predation of Peru's national resources and its financial, economic, and environmental effects are stressed heavily in the lead essay by Héctor Béjar.¹⁷ In the past, these critiques would have been aimed at the United States' economic encroachment. However, today, the most prominent mine owner, sources of imports, and general trading partner is the People's Republic of China.¹⁸ Widespread resentment of the pollution of groundwater, choking of the internal industry with cheap exports, and the skimming of the profits can very well be turned against Beijing these days.

There are some indications of this reaction to China also happening in Bolivia which signed an agreement with Chinese companies to extract its lithium deposits in February 2023.¹⁹ This, in turn, led to heated protests by communities living near the Uyuni salt flats, the center of the Bolivian lithium fields. The extraction of the lithium would pollute the groundwater of the Uyuni. The left-wing government of Luis Arce thus had to face anti-extractivist protests that are usually aimed at western international financial powers exploiting the resources of indigenous populations of Latin America.²⁰

An equally difficult problem Bolivia's leftist government faces is the drone deal it made with Iran. On July 26, 2023, the two countries signed a defense agreement. Its core feature was the Bolivian purchase of Iranian surveillance drones anti-drug roles. Analysts denouncing this deal, however, point to the potential role of these UAVs for Iranian intelligence-gathering in the Western Hemisphere.²¹ Currently, the fight against drug trafficking is a crucial topic of Bolivian internal debates. The governing party is divided between the supporters of the previous leader, Evo Morales Ayma, and the current president, Luis Arce. Evo was toppled in a coup in late 2019 following widespread unrest after allegations of electoral fraud. His party staged a comeback in the 2020 November elections, but it was then led by Luis Arce, his former minister of the interior. Now, the Movimiento al Socialismo governing party is fragmenting because of the conflict between the supporters of Evoism and the current leader.²² Both sides attack the other with allegations of supporting drug trafficking. In this environment, the aid of foreign donors, especially in the field of drug enforcement, is a big help to Bolivia. However, it can alienate electors if the goal of the UAVs turns out to be different. Also, Bolivia's important partner and neighbor, Argentina, sees the Iranian presence as a threat in its sovereignty. Iran and Argentina have strained relations since the 1994 terror attack by Hezbollah in Buenos Aires.²³ Thus, another project of an anti-West power can generate public resentment, which can be used in the anti-communist colonial rhetoric of the Vox and the Iberosfera parties.

While it can be argued that there is ample fuel for resentment against Iranian, Russian, and Chinese influence, can right-wing parties effectively capitalize on it? Is there any indication that Latin America can accept these parties as instruments of anti-Eurasian colonialism in this hemisphere?

The question lies primarily in whether these parties can project their agenda to the general public. The use of Hispanidad and traditional values dating back to Hispanic influence for anti-colonial reasons is not new. Back in the 1920s, in the influential left-wing Peruvian journal *Amauta*, not only promoted classic Marxist texts but also a defense of the Catholic faith as a core feature of Latin American resilience against imperialism. Dora Mayer de Zulen, a core figure of the Indigenista movement so widely accepted today,

promoted the conservative values of Catholicism as an antidote to the modernist, utilitarian imperialist culture of the United States.²⁴ Today, the conservative forces in question are generally pro-US, although it is a feature of their politics that requires nuance. This call for traditional values as a means of anti-Eurasian imperialism also turned against the influence of the “LGBT lobby,” “globalism,” and other forces characterized as extra-hemispheric. The question is whether the Vox and its allies can win the information war by depicting these forces as alien to Latin American values and culture.

It will also be a challenge to present the Iberosfera as an anti-colonial project. It is, in this sense, essential to clarify how the Iberosfera parties relate themselves to the traditional colonial overlord, the United States. Spanish Hispanidad-based anti-imperialism had, in the past, a notable anti-US edge. Significantly Franco’s regime in Spain maintained a pragmatic relationship with Castro’s Cuba, given that the isolated international position of the Spanish regime needed any kind of relationship that it could establish. Spanish agricultural machinery replaced American machinery in Cuba after the U.S. embargo on trade with the Communist island.²⁵

The relationship of the Spanish Right with the United States is still ambivalent. In this context Vox pursues a view similar to Trumpism: defining the colonial danger from the US as the effect of the “deep state,” determined by the Democrats and their woke transnational agenda. In turn, they also accept the geopolitical patronage of the United States in Latin America, minus the woke values of today’s culture wars. The Carta de Madrid is a classic example of the promotion of pro-capitalist and traditional neoliberal values.²⁶ This echoes an approach of right-wing parties in Latin America and also with the position of the Spanish Right in the post-dictature era, starting with the Partido Popular governments in the second half of the 1990s. This means not only the embrace of neoliberal values but an alignment with the conservative side of the mainstream U.S. approach to the hemisphere since the 1980s, starting with the Santa Fe I document.²⁷ This document, prepared by a committee of conservative foreign policy thinkers in 1980, framed the fight against extra-hemispheric influence in parallel with the struggle for neoliberal policies and the strengthening of beneficial alliances between the United States

and South American states. The similarities between the ideology of U.S.-Hispanic relations and the Iberosfera concept, are intriguing.

Along with this positive approach to United States republicanism, the Iberosfera concept also has the potential to mobilize old anti-U.S. sentiments by the creation of its network. Here it views the U.S. “woke” progressivism exploiting indigenous activism for its own questionably progressive ends. In this year’s commemorative essay on the Día of Hispanidad (12th October) in the *Gaceta* of the Iberosfera, Iván Vélez defined the exclusivity of indigenous identities as a malign influence on Latin American identity, pointing out the Andean Wiphala and Chilean Mapuche wenufoye flags as symbols of these movements, that will cause the “new filibusters” to win, a reference to U.S. mercenaries penetrating Mesoamerica in the nineteenth century.²⁸ In connecting the Indigenous movements and the malign influence of U.S. progressive groups, the Iberosfera concept has a distinctive anti-American position. The work of Raúl Tortorelo, a Mexican author in the *Gaceta de Iberosfera* notably evinces this paradoxical view towards the Giant of the North. In one of his essays, he argues that the left-wing Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexican president should not complain about CIA spying in the wake of the Ukraine Papers leak, as the CIA merely revealed information that proved the illegal actions of AMLO.²⁹ In another essay, however, he accuses the same agency of the promotion of postmodernist philosophy to advance North American power goals by destroying traditional values.³⁰ The ambiguity of the approach to the United States is evident: it is an ally if it is working against local autocratic leaders, and an enemy if it is pushing a “progreso-global agenda.” This approach could work if the Iberosfera parties could frame this in a consistent way that echoes local problems and offers solutions to the problems generated by the socio-economic processes of the recent decades.

In summary, Vox and its Latin American allies have a chance to mobilize powerful anti-colonial sentiments in Latin American societies if they can establish a persuasive narrative. They have to frame the extra-hemispheric, Eurasian powers’ encroachment as the main colonialist threat to the hemisphere, for which, given the rising local footprint of China and the infiltration of Russia and Iran, they have persuasive evidence. They have to rekindle, too, the conservative traditions of anti-imperialism while making sure that Spain

does not look like a neoimperial power. They also have to manage their relationship with the U.S., to carve a path that avoids antagonizing the Northern Giant and also plays upon traditional anti-U.S. sentiments in Latin America. Given their eclectic, anti-globalist but at the same time pro-Western approach, the Iberosfera has a chance to gain influence although it could also fumble the ball in juggling various political needs and challenges that face the parties of the Iberosfera. An interesting – and maybe crucial – element of this challenge is the attitude and handling of Latin American immigration by Vox and its allies in origin countries, which can establish the benign image of these parties as allies of Global South societies.

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Endnotes

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